

Citation for published version:

Bull, A 2015, 'Review of The Red Brigades and the Discourse of Violence. Revolution and Restoration', *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, vol. 20, no. 3, pp. 410-412. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1354571X.2015.1026173>

DOI:

[10.1080/1354571X.2015.1026173](https://doi.org/10.1080/1354571X.2015.1026173)

Publication date:

2015

Document Version

Early version, also known as pre-print

[Link to publication](#)

University of Bath

Alternative formats

If you require this document in an alternative format, please contact:
openaccess@bath.ac.uk

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Marco Briziarelli, *The Red Brigades and the Discourse of Violence. Revolution and Restoration* (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), pp. 173, ISBN13: 978-1-138-77692-0 (hbk).

This is an interesting (though not user-friendly, given its convoluted style) book which presents an alternative reinterpretation of the Red Brigades from the perspective of their own discourse or, as the author puts it: 'in order [...] to assess an evaluation of a group according to its own terms, values, and objectives' (p. 151). Beyond and above this scope, the book also aims at providing an overall re-interpretation of Italian history since Unification through Gramscian lenses, whereby the Red Brigades' revolutionary project and actions are assessed in light of the historically only partial success on the part of the Italian state in establishing a hegemonic order.

In pursuing these aims, the author strongly critiques the plethora of existing studies on Italian terrorism, somewhat ungenerously bracketing them in two camps: those which tend to reduce the experience of the Red Brigades 'to a farce in the context of larger conspiratorial schemas' and those which view such experience as 'the result of an ideological detachment from reality' (p. 55). Having disposed of the scholarly literature in this rather cavalier fashion, the author then explains his own approach. This is based conceptually on the articulation of hegemony and ideology on the one hand and of the proletarian and bourgeois public spheres on the other. Methodologically, the study revolves around an analysis of both the Red Brigades' representation of their actions through their communiqués and the Italian media's representations of these same actions at the time of two crucial events: the kidnapping of Judge Mario Sossi in 1974 and the kidnapping and assassination of Aldo Moro in 1978. As far as the media is concerned, Briziarelli limits his analysis to three national newspapers: *Corriere della Sera*, *La Stampa* and *L'Unità*, chosen as representatives of three distinct ideological positions.

So where does the author's multi-layered approach lead to in terms of a re-assessment of the Red Brigades? From the long-term historical perspective, Briziarelli sees the origins of the Red Brigades as the latest and most recent manifestation of a 'passive revolution'. Following Gramsci (and overlooking recent revisionist interpretations), he argues that, as in the case of the Italian Risorgimento and the fascist period, which represented 'the frustrated corporatist attempts of one class to exert domination (instead of hegemony) over the whole society' (p. 70), so the post-war reconstruction and the economic boom were further examples in which 'the Italian ruling class achieved domination over consent, in other words, without exerting hegemony over the whole society' (p. 83). This left open the possibility of social and political contestation which in turn created the terrain for the emergence of revolutionary groups intent upon affirming a radical counter-hegemonic project. One such group was the Red Brigades. From the perspective of the chosen two case studies mentioned above, the main arguments put forward concern firstly, the failure of the Red Brigades' counter-hegemonic project and second, the overcoming of contrasting and even opposing ideologies on the part of competing media and political actors in the name of a national project and of the 'cult of the nation-state'.

As regards the reasons for failure of the Red Brigades, the author points to two main weaknesses in their counter-hegemonic project. The first was the group's increasing reliance upon militarization and the armed struggle, hence in Gramscian terms its prioritizing a 'war of manouver' over a 'war of position' against the bourgeois order in the mistaken belief that the crisis of capitalism in Italy in the 1970s had reduced the state to the imposition of a purely oppressive regime, depriving it of the ability to attract consensus. The second reason was the Red Brigades' inability to prefigure the future in ways that transcended the model of the (bourgeois) state, hence the group ended up mimicking its enemy, by behaving like an alternative state, with its own laws, justice system and judicial verdicts (as epitomized in the

case of the 'trial' of Aldo Moro, culminating in his death sentence). In this way, the Red Brigades remained subordinate to the bourgeois state and indeed showed 'a failed emancipation from a state-centric logic' (p. 144), while their increasing militarization ended up destroying only the enemy's 'outer perimeter' (p. 155).

However, the main failure of the Red Brigades consisted in their unwittingly cementing the unity of their adversaries, hence strengthening the very hegemonic order which they aspired to destroy. The author's analysis of the media representations of the Red Brigades and their actions, in fact, shows an increasing convergence between their previously opposing ideological positions (especially in the case of the Communist paper *L'Unità*), in favour of the emergence of common themes emphasizing the myth of national unity: 'a sort of civil religion [...] based on the sublimation of a hegemonic order and its sacralization' (p. 144).

In the conclusion, Briziarelli contraposes the counter-hegemonic project of the Red Brigades, which erroneously prioritized the war of manouver, to that of the Italian Communist Party, which after the war had prioritized the war of movement but had ended up being co-opted into the ruling order. In his view, to secure a chance of success a revolutionary project must inject a 'strong element of Jacobin coercion' (p. 156) into a counter-hegemonic strategy relying primarily on a war of position. In this conclusion we find the wider rationale of this book: an analysis of the hegemonic and counter-hegemonic struggles in the history of Italy, in which the Red Brigades provided a 'moment of demystification' and a 'utopic project' despite its ultimate failure (p. 160). From this perspective it becomes a lot clearer why the author has discarded and overlooked most of the literature on Italian terrorism. The Red Brigades are not of interest per se but only as a further example of the historical struggle against bourgeois capitalism.

Anna Cento Bull

University of Bath